

# Twelve Beliefs the Mormon Church Might Not Want You to Know About

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This decade has been called, “The Mormon Moment,” the time that America’s largest home-grown religion finally comes into its own as a part of the Christian tapestry. Even some LDS quirks seem to be turning into positives. Shifting sexual mores have made Mormon polygamy and sacred undergarments a matter more of slightly kinky fascination rather Puritan disgust. And after expressing big disapproval over Big Love, Church leaders shifted strategies and met the hit musical, the “The Book of Mormon,” with bemused acceptance, praising it “for really nailing the Mormon sweetness, niceness, and sense of do-gooderness,” and filling theater programs with their own advertisements.



In an effort to reassure Evangelical voters, presidential candidate Mitt Romney inserted the phrase “the same god” into his domestic policy debate against Barack Obama, and Billy Graham’s website showed solidarity by removing Mormonism from a list of “cults.” Since then, Mormon missionaries have been quoted as saying, “Even Billy Graham says we are Christians.” Over the course of 2012, the LDS Church promoted “I’m a Mormon,” a multi-million dollar marketing campaign seeking to portray Mormonism as mainstream. And on December 10, 2013, the Mormon church renounced and denounced a part of its racist past.

But *do* Mormons and Evangelicals worship the same god? How mainstream are their beliefs?

Dr. Tony Nugent, retired professor of religious studies, has compiled a list of twelve teachings that Mormons tend to downplay. Dr. Nugent calls each of these beliefs “questionable.” A quick read suggest they also are far from mainstream.

## 1. The American Continent Was Originally Settled by Ancient Near Easterners.

The story of the *Book of Mormon (BoM)* is that the American continent was originally settled by people from the ancient Near East who came across the ocean in boats between 5000 and 2500 years ago. This includes four groups: the Jaredites, who came from Mesopotamia after the fall of the Tower of Babel (3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium BC), and three groups of Israelites who

came in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.—Lehites from the tribe of Manasseh, Ishmaelites from the tribe of Ephraim, and Mulekites from the tribe of Judah. Contrary to this view, archaeological, historical, and genetic evidence indicates that the American continent was originally settled by Mongoloid people who came over the Bering land bridge during the last Ice Age and who are the ancestors of today's Native American people.

## **2. Native Americans Are Descendants of Ancient Israelites.**

Much of the *BoM* story focuses on two groups of Israelites in the New World, the Nephites and the Lamanites, descended from two of the sons of Lehi of the tribe of Manasseh. These groups fought continually, but when Christ came from heaven after his ascension to visit them in AD 34, they all believed in him and stopped fighting. However, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD, when the Lamanites stopped believing in Christ, these peaceful relations ended. Their renewed hostilities culminated in a great religious war in AD 385 at the hill Cumorah in upstate New York, in which the Lamanites were victorious and 230,000 Nephites were killed. The few surviving Nephites soon died, and the surviving Lamanites became the “American Indians.”

Among the problems with this scenario are that there is no evidence that any Native American groups are Semitic, but rather that they are Mongoloid; there are no surviving traces in their cultures of ancient Israelite customs, language, or religion; and there are no traces of their supposedly former Christian practices and beliefs.

Then from where would Joseph Smith have gotten this story? The mistaken idea that the American Indians descend from the lost tribes of Israel was, in fact, a very popular idea in the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The closest parallel to Joseph Smith's version of the idea is found in Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, published in 1823, just four years before Joseph started working on the *BoM*. The many specific parallels between these two works have often been noted. How might Smith have known about this work? From Oliver Cowdery, one of Smith's scribes in the translation of the *BoM* and whose family attended the church in Vermont where Ethan Smith was pastor at the time he was writing his book. In her 1945 work, *No Man Knows My History*, Fawn Brodie writes, “Thus where the *View of the Hebrews* was just bad scholarship, the *BoM* was highly original and imaginative fiction.” (Brodie, p. 48)

## **3. Dark Skin is a Sign of God's Curse, White Skin a Sign of God's Blessing.**

In the *BoM* dark skin is a sign of God's curse, while white skin is a sign of his blessing. When the Lamanites displease God, “because of their iniquity....the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Nephi 5:21). Later, when the Lamanites become Christians, “their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:15). Other racist passages in the scripture have simply been changed by Mormon authorities—e.g., 2 Nephi 30:6, which originally referred to conversion to

Christianity bringing about a “white and delightsome people,” now reads, as of 1981, “a pure and delightsome people.” As for black people, Joseph Smith taught that they are cursed as “sons of Cain.” Brigham Young, the successor of Joseph Smith, stated: “Shall I tell you the law of God in regard to the African race? If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot. This will always be so” (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 10). Since blacks were a stigmatized race in Mormonism, black men were denied ordination to the priesthood in the LDS Church. While the LDS Church, under pressure, finally granted black men the priesthood in 1978, the racism in their Scriptures remains as offensive as ever. Note: The doctrine that black skin is a punishment was renounced by the Church hierarchy in December 2013.

#### **4. The BoM is Based on a Historically Accurate and Believable Ancient Work.**

Mormon authorities teach that the *BoM* is a translation from ancient records written in a “Reformed Egyptian” script on metal plates between the years 2500 BC and AD 421. Among the many reasons for doubting this claim are the following:

- Many different animals, plants, & manufactured goods are reported in the *BoM* story as being present in the New World during this time period. There is apparently no credible evidence that any of the following were present in the New World during this time period: cows, horses, oxen, asses, goats, sheep, pigs, honeybees, elephants, barley, wheat, silk, iron & brass metallurgy, steel, metal coins, swords, chariots, wheels, compasses, and metal plates inscribed with writing.
- Many passages in the *BoM* repeat Old and New Testament biblical passages word-for-word. But how would Nephi, for instance, who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, know passages in Old Testament books such as Malachi, written after his time, and in the New Testament, written 600-700 years later?
- Analogously, why would distinctively Christian practices and beliefs, including the establishment of a “Church of Christ,” the practice of baptism, and belief that those not baptized are damned to be tortured in hell for eternity, be found in ancient records said to have been written before the beginning of the Christian Era?
- In the second verse of the *BoM* Nephi says, “Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.” (1 Nephi 1:2). Later in the work Moroni says that his record is “in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32). These are problematic statements. First of all, the term “Jew” refers to the people of the tribe of Judah and those from the other tribes who joined with them, starting with the period of the Babylonian exile (which is after Lehi’s family has left Jerusalem). In addition, there is no biblical or other evidence that Israelites of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC spoke Egyptian or wrote using any of the forms of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

#### **5. Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon from Gold Plates.**

The Mormon story is that the Nephite military commander and prophet Moroni buried a history of his people, written on “gold plates,” in the hill Cumorah in AD 421. 1400 years later, on the night of September 22-23, 1823, Moroni, now having become an angel, visits 17-year-old Joseph Smith in his bedroom and tells him where the plates are buried. It happens to be just 3 miles south of where Smith lives. He goes there and sees the plates in a stone box, but as soon as he tries to take them the angel forbids him. He returns to the same spot on the same night of the year for the next two years, without success. Then, by looking into his seer-stone or “peep stone,” a chocolate-colored, egg-shaped stone which he had found when digging a well in 1822 and used to find lost and buried treasure, Smith learns that to be successful he must marry Emma Hale and take her with him to Cumorah. So on Sept. 22, 1827, he and Emma conduct a “black magic” ritual: at midnight, dressed entirely in black, they drive a black carriage drawn by a black horse to the hill. Joseph unearths the box and takes the plates, along with some magical eyeglasses made out of stones (called “interpreters” and “the Urim and Thummim”) with which to decipher the “reformed Egyptian” language in which the texts on the plates are written. According to Smith, the plates were “six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite as thick as common tin;” they were “filled with engravings in Egyptian characters and bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book with three rings running through the whole;” and the stack of metal pages stood about six inches high.

Smith’s main translation process involved putting the interpreters (or his “peep-stone”) in a hat, putting his face in the hat (he didn’t need to view the plates themselves), and dictating to a scribe. After 116-initial pages of translation were lost by Smith’s scribe Martin Harris, Moroni supposedly took away the interpreters, and Smith was forced to rely on his old and trusty peep-stone. Smith’s translation was completed at the end of June 1829, and the *BoM* was first published by E.B. Grandin in Palmyra, NY, in March 1830. Where can we see these marvelous gold plates? We can’t, because Smith gave them back to Moroni.

## **6. There Are Testimonies to the “Gold Plates” from 11 Credible Witnesses.**

But, say Mormon texts, there were 11 “witnesses” to the gold plates! These witness statements are printed at the beginning of each copy of the *BoM*. Three witnesses declare that an angel of God showed them the engravings upon the plates, while the eight others claim that that Joseph Smith showed them the plates with their engravings, which they also handled. Regarding the first three witnesses, Martin Harris said he had “never claimed to have seen the plates with his natural eyes,” but only with “spiritual eyes.” Oliver Cowdery was a relative of Smith’s, served as his scribe in translating the *BoM*, and was accustomed to having otherworldly visions. He told Smith that he had seen the gold plates in a “vision” even before the two of them had met. The third, David Whitmer, later said that the angel he saw “had no appearance or shape,” that he merely had the “impression” of an angel.

A few years after the *BoM* was published these three witnesses were excommunicated and harshly denounced and insulted by Smith. He described Whitmer as “an ass to bray out cursings instead of blessings.” He denounced Cowdery as “too mean to mention” and the leader of a gang of “scoundrels of the deepest degree.” He said Martin Harris was “so far beneath contempt that to notice him would be too great a sacrifice for a gentleman to make.”

Regarding the other eight witnesses, one of them was Joseph Smith’s father, two of them were his brothers, and the other five were close relations of David Whitmer. All the Whitmer family witnesses were later excommunicated, although David eventually rejoined the church.

## **7. Ancient Prophecies in Mormon Scriptures Foretell the Coming of Joseph Smith.**

Joseph Smith, Jr. couldn’t resist the temptation of injecting a self-serving prophecy of himself into the *BoM*. In the section of the book supposedly written in about 600 BC an Israelite by the name of Nephi reports that the biblical patriarch Joseph uttered this prophecy: “A seer shall the Lord my God raise up,” and “his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father” (2 Nephi 3:6,15). Here we have a prophecy like a riddle, the answer to which is, of course, Joseph Smith, Jr. and Sr. Not satisfied to have this prophecy of himself and his father only in the *BoM*, Smith goes further by adding nearly-identical verses to the text of the Bible. In the last chapter of Genesis in Smith’s *Inspired Version of The Holy Scriptures*, the Lord says to Joseph just before he dies in Egypt: “That seer will I bless.....and his name shall be called Joseph; and it shall be after the name of his father; and he shall be like unto you.” This and the many other “prophecies” in Mormon scripture are cases of what is known in biblical scholarship as a *vaticinium ex eventu*, a “prophecy after the fact.” And it is one where the ulterior motive of the perpetrator of the hoax could not be more evident.

## **8. Joseph Smith Restored What Catholics Removed from the Bible.**

What is the basis for this and the many other Mormon additions to the Bible? As explained in 1 Nephi, these are needed because the “Great and Abominable Church, which is most abominable above all other churches,” traditionally understood in Mormonism as the Roman Catholic Church, has “taken away” from the Bible “many plain and precious things.” But in fact this couldn’t have been the work of the Catholics, because there’s no sign of these omissions in the Hebrew Bible, written several hundred years before there were any Christians or churches! It must have been the nefarious Jews who did it, which would explain why so many of the passages Joseph Smith identifies as having been removed from the Bible and which he restores are its Old Testament (< Hebrew Bible) references to Jesus Christ. Take parts of the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis in the *Inspired Version*: God says to Adam, “Turn unto me.....and repent of all thy transgressions, and be baptized, even in water, in the name of mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth, which is Jesus Christ”

(Genesis 6:53). And then “Adam cried unto the Lord, and was caught away by the Spirit of the Lord, and was carried down into the water, and was laid under the water, and was brought forth out of the water; and thus he was baptized” (Genesis 6:67).

## **9. The LDS Church’s Theological Doctrines Are Not Significantly Different from Those of Mainstream Christian Denominations.**

In the last few decades LDS authorities have made a major effort to downplay its distinctive teachings (and practices) in order to present as a “mainstream” Christian denomination. These distinctive doctrines include the following: (The last two were taught by Joseph Smith but are not official doctrines of the LDS church.)

- God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Ghost are three separate divine beings (Mormonism is anti-Trinitarian).
- In his pre-mortal existence Jesus Christ, the literal Son of God the Father, was the LORD (= Jehovah/Yahweh) of the Old Testament
- Humans have pre-mortal existences as spirit-children of God the Father and a Heavenly Mother.
- Humans can become angels, and angels can become humans, e. g., Adam used to be St. Michael (refer to Temple Endowment ceremony), Noah used to be St. Gabriel, and the Nephite man Moroni became the angel Moroni.
- Matter has always existed, so the Creation was not *ex nihilo*.
- There is no “hell” in the traditional Christian sense but rather a spirit prison where wicked spirits are cleansed in preparation for their resurrection.
- A deceased person who was never baptized can get to the Celestial Kingdom as a result of a proxy baptism in a Mormon temple.
- The highest level of the Celestial Kingdom is reserved for couples who have been “sealed” in a Mormon temple for a life of “eternal marriage.”
- God the Father used to be a human living on the earth (Joseph Smith, “King Follett Discourse,” 1844)
- Humans can become Gods (be exalted) in the future and dwell in the highest level of the Celestial Kingdom. (Joseph Smith, “King Follett Discourse,” 1844)

## **10. “If ye abide not that covenant [plurality of wives] then are ye damned.”**

Since the 19th Century the LDS church has denied that polygamy is a part of its core doctrines, and many Mormons deny that Joseph Smith was a polygamist. However, the doctrine of “plural marriage,” referring in this case to a man having more than one wife (polygyny), was revealed to Joseph Smith at Nauvoo, IL, on July 12, 1843, and was enshrined in 1876 as Section 132 of *Doctrine and Covenants (D&C)*, one of the LDS Church’s scriptures. At the same time Section 101 in the early edition of the *D&C*, specifying the rule of monogamy, was removed. In this new “revelation,” God declares plurality of wives as essential for attainment of godhood (article 20), that those who reject it are damned (article

4), and that if Emma Smith rejects Joseph's other marriages he will destroy her (article 54). This revelation was kept secret from the general church membership until Brigham Young made it known in 1852.

The principle of plural marriage in Mormonism has its roots in 1832, when Joseph Smith told his innermost circle that "he had inquired of the Lord concerning the principle of plurality of wives, and he received for an answer...that it is a true principle, but the time had not yet come for it to be practiced." At about that time, when Joseph and Emma had become boarders at the home of John and Elsa Johnson in Hiram, Ohio, people in the neighborhood suspected that Joseph was having a sexual relationship with their daughter, 15-year old Marinda Nancy Johnson. According to a statement by Marinda's brother Luke Johnson, on March 24, 1832 "a mob of forty or fifty...entered his room in the middle of the night....he was then seized by as many as could get hold of him, and taken about forty rods from the house...they tore off the few night clothes that he had on, for the purpose of emasculating him, and had Dr. Dennison there to perform the operation; but he refused to operate. The mob...poured tar over him, and then stuck feathers in it and left him." Early the following year 16-year-old Fanny Alger moved into the Smith house as a domestic servant, and in February or March Joseph took her as his plural wife. He kept this secret from Emma, but in 1835 she caught them *in flagrante delicto* and ejected Fanny from the house. This incident led to a severe rift between Smith and his collaborator Oliver Cowdery, who referred to it as "a dirty, nasty, filthy affair."

These conflicts apparently did little to alter Smith's course of action. "Joseph continued to take plural wives throughout the 1830's in Ohio and Missouri, and he married with even greater frequency in Nauvoo in the early 1840's." In his lifetime Smith "married at least thirty-three women, and probably as many as forty-eight." (Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, pp. 5, 119-121)

Mormons who are taught that Joseph was a "devoted husband" (see the LDS Church's website) should be reminded that Emma Smith never accepted the principle or the practice of plural marriage. After Joseph's death she did not join the Mormons moving west to Utah, led by the polygamist Brigham Young. Instead she stayed behind and joined the anti-polygamist Reorganized LDS Church (known today as the Community of Christ). While the practice of polygamy has been forbidden in the LDS Church since the "1890 Manifesto," it is still enshrined in the revealed Scriptures as necessary for obtaining "godhood."

## **11. Joseph Smith Translated the *Book of Abraham* from Egyptian Papyri.**

In July of 1835 a man by the name of Michael Chandler brought some Egyptian mummies and papyri which had been excavated near the ancient city of Thebes to Kirtland, OH, and sold them to Joseph Smith. Although Smith had no knowledge of the ancient Egyptian language or writing, he nevertheless "translated" some of these papyri, and in 1842 published the results along with three "facsimiles" (with interpretations) as the *Book of*

*Abraham*. In 1880, thirty-six years after Smith's death, this work was incorporated as Part 2 of the LDS Church's scripture known as *The Pearl of Great Price*. In Smith's "translation" the patriarch Abraham tells a story of traveling from Chaldea to Egypt, where a priest lays him on an altar to sacrifice him, but he is miraculously saved by an angel of God; he gives a discourse about the universe, time, and stars, including the star/planet Kolob, which is closest to the throne of God; and he provides a polytheistic paraphrase of the first two chapters of Genesis which substitutes the word "Gods" for the biblical "God" and "Lord God."

Many prominent 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Egyptologists have examined the Joseph Smith papyri, including the one from the Egyptian "Book of Breathings" which is thought to be the specific papyrus which Smith translated as the main text of the *Book of Abraham*. All the papyri are inscribed with hieratic funerary texts, and the "Book of Breathings" is dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC or AD, 2000 years after Abraham supposedly lived. It is the unanimous opinion of the many Egyptologists who have examined the papyri that the text of Smith's *Book of Abraham*, together with his related interpretations of the papyrus "facsimiles," bear no resemblance whatsoever to the papyri texts. The *Book of Abraham* is, in the words of these renowned Egyptologists, an "impudent fraud" (A. H. Sayce, Oxford Univ.), "absurd" (W. M. Flinders Petrie, London Univ.), a work by an "absolutely ignorant" person (James H. Breasted, Univ. of Chicago), a work whose "explanations [of the facsimiles] are completely wrong" (Richard A. Parker, Brown Univ.), a "pure fabrication" (Arthur C. Mace, Metropolitan Museum of Art), a "work of pure imagination" (S. A. B. Mercer, Western Theological Seminary).

## **12. Joseph Smith Was a Highly Ethical, Honest, Truth-Seeking, Law-Abiding Person.**

Although Joseph Smith was clearly very charismatic, there is considerable evidence that the official Mormon view of his pure moral character is a fiction. When Smith became famous as the "Mormon Prophet," people who knew him from his early years were aghast, and they express their feelings in the following signed affidavits:

Mrs. S. F. Anderick: "Jo was pompous, pretentious...claimed he could tell where lost or hidden things and treasures were buried. He deceived many farmers."

Isaac Butts: "I have frequently seen Jo drunk. He had a forked witch-hazel rod, later a peep-stone with which he claimed he could locate buried money or hidden things."

W. R. Hine: "I heard a man say who was a neighbor to the Mormon Smith family, that they were thieves, indolent, the lowest, meanest family he ever saw or heard of."

Joseph Rogers: "Farmers said he as a terror to the neighborhood and that he would either have to go to State prison, be hung, or leave the county, or he would be killed. Jo contrived in every way to obtain money without work. The farmers claimed that not a week passed



without Jo stole something. I knew at least one hundred farmers in the towns of Phelps, Manchester, and Palmyra, N.Y., who would make out that Jo Smith the Mormon prophet was a liar, intemperate and a base imposter...He could read the character of men readily and could tell who he could dupe."

Mrs. Sylvia Walker: "They [the Smith family] were the lowest family I ever knew. They worked very little and had the reputation of stealing everything they could lay their hands on....When Jo told his neighbors about finding gold plates no one believed him nor paid any attention to it, he had humbugged them so much."

On August 1, 1831, Joseph Smith received a revelation which became Section 58 of Doctrine and Covenants. Verse 21 of that section states: "Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land" (D&C 58:21). This revelation is at odds with his own life history. Beginning at least as early as 1826, when he was 25 years old, until his death, Smith was continuously in trouble with legal authorities. In his lifetime Smith had to defend himself in forty-eight criminal cases and had a total of over 200 suits brought against him. His troubles with the law caused the parents of his first wife, Emma Hale, to disown their daughter. Many of Smith's trials are attributed by Mormons to religious persecution. However, his legal troubles predate his religious proclamations. Smith's first known trial, on March 20, 1826, in East Bainbridge, NY, he was arrested, jailed, charged, and convicted of being "a disorderly person and an imposter" and "falsely pretending to discover lost goods."

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The questionable beliefs and teachings outlined above, as well as others not discussed, have created problems for Mormons, their leaders, and the LDS Church from the religion's beginnings until today. The Church does not allow members to openly and independently investigate or question its core beliefs or historical claims, or to challenge its leadership or core values. It does not allow hard-to-swallow doctrines to be discussed with potential converts before they have digested simpler ones (called "milk before meat"), nor for these doctrines to be publicly disseminated. When members do these things, and do not leave the Church voluntarily, they are "disfellowshipped" or excommunicated. Witness the famous modern-day 1993 case of the "September Six."

"Lying for the Lord" is the term some ex-Mormons use for the Mormon practice of not telling the whole truth or dissimulating when necessary to further the image and interests of the Church. In the 19th Century, when the clash between Mormons and mainstream Christians was more overt, deception was more overt as well. Examples often cited are the denials by LDS leaders and members when they were charged with condoning and practicing polygamy ("plural marriage"). Since polygamy became illegal throughout the United States in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, church leaders such as Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and Heber Kimball, as well as members who practiced polygamy were breaking the law, so

that secrecy and denial were considered necessary to protect the church. At times deception assumed the status of a religious duty. This stance led to perjury by LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith and others during the Reed Smoot Congressional Hearings of 1904-7.

The historical necessity of self-protective deception creates a conundrum in that the Mormon religion strongly values honesty both in private life and in its public image. Yet the issue of deception in Mormonism runs deeper than a matter of "situational ethics." Consider the following statements by Mormon leaders:

Joseph Fielding Smith, the tenth president of the LDS Church (1970-72): "If Joseph Smith was a deceiver, who willfully attempted to mislead the people, then he should be exposed; his claims should be refuted, and his doctrines shown to be false." (Doctrines of Salvation, Vol. 1, p. 188).

Orson Pratt, elder and member of the original Quorum of the LDS Church: "The Book of Mormon...must be either true or false. If true, it is one of the most important messages ever sent from God to man...If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked, bold, deep-laid impositions ever palmed upon the world, calculated to deceive and ruin millions" (Introduction, *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*, 1850).

Should Mormonism be founded in an elaborate hoax, as much evidence suggests, then deception is not just an occasional practice, but the foundation structure upon which the entire edifice of the Mormon religion has been erected. Mormons of good faith are then inescapably caught between the demands of doctrine and their core moral values of honesty and integrity.

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*More about Mormonism:*

**Mormon Church: Dark Skin a Sign of God's Curse No Longer**

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